Manchester Says Johnson Was Unbriefed on Atom

By HOMER BIGART

According to William Manchester, the assassination of President Kennedy caught Lyndon B. Johnson so poorly briefed on his responsibilities as Commander in Chief that if a Russian nuclear attack had been launched that afternoon it could have crippled this country's power to retaliate.

This statement, contained in Mr. Manchester's book, "The Death of a President," was challenged promptly yesterday by officials in charge of security during the Kennedy Administration.

They said that President Johnson had been fully briefed on the contents of the football-shaped satchel that lay in the Presidential jet that carried him—and the dead President—back to Washington from Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.

The satchel contained the codes needed to launch a retaliatory nuclear attack.

Says Johnson Wasn't Briefed

Mr. Manchester said Gen. Maxwell Taylor, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was confident that the bag would be somewhere near the new President but was unsure whether Mr. Johnson knew what was in it.

"The difficulty," Mr. Manchester wrote, "was that Johnson had no idea of what was in the bag. He knew that it existed, but he hadn't been briefed about the contents, and if the thunderbolt of all-out war struck that afternoon, the country's retaliatory arsenal could be spiked until he had been led through Taz Shepard's primers for the first time."

Capt. Tazewell Shepard Jr. was a military aide.

The security officials, who asked that their names be withheld, said Mr. Johnson had been coached thoroughly as Vice President on procedures to be followed in the event of a nuclear attack. President Kennedy had insisted on this, they said.

Thus, the Manchester contention that a dangerous hiatus of command existed for an hour after the assassination because the new President was uninformed and also because of communications difficulties was totally untrue, they said.

President Johnson, who has withheld comment on all the previously disputed passages in the book, passages condemned particularly by Mrs. John F. Kennedy and Senator Robert F. Kennedy, remained silent on this one.

Pentagon's Statement

But a spokesman for the Defense Department issued this comment:

"The statements carried by the press services attributed to William Manchester bearing on the nuclear readiness of the United States on Nov. 22, 1963, were untrue.

"On that date, Lyndon Johnson, as Vice President and as President, was fully aware of the procedures used to authorize the release of nuclear weapons in retaliation against attack on the United States.

"Governmental communications, military and civil, were fully operational at all times and were far in excess of any requirement arising out of any security emergency. Those secure communications operate independently of commercial systems."

Mr. Manchester had said there was a slowdown in commercial telephone service because of a tremendous load of calls in the hours immediately following the assassination.

He said that phones in the Senate and House offices, the various department headquarters, the White House and even the Signal Corps had been temporarily paralyzed. He wrote that Senator Edward M. Kennedy roamed the streets in Washington, trying the phones of strangers, until he got through to his brother, Robert, who was then Attorney General

Associated Press

Back from her Mexican vacation yesterday, Mrs. John F. Kennedy was preceded at Kennedy Airport by her children, John Jr. and Caroline, at the right, and her nephew and niece, Anthony and Anna Radziwill. They returned following a short stay in Acapulco.

Attack Code

to learn if the President was dead.

"It became obvious that in a national emergency this [telephone service] would be the first link to snap," Mr. Manchester said.

The book went on sale prematurely Monday in Pittsburgh, and an April 6 release date for reviews was broken yesterday by Women's Wear Daily, a tabloid newspaper for the fashion trade.

Leading bookstores in the city took the position yesterday that they had no reason to place the book on sale before the publication date unless a local store violated the agreement.

Saul Madlin, the chief book buyer at E. J. Korvette, reported that about 6,000 out of an initial order of 15,000 books had been sold in advance at $7.99.

There were indications yesterday that a price war might be in the making.

At Macy's, which is also taking orders for the book at $7.99, a saleswoman in the book department said:

"It's gone down in price already, and Lord knows it may go down to even less than that."

The book, published by Harper & Row, runs to 647 pages, plus charts, diagrams and a list of sources. It is priced at $10.

Most of the contents of the book—the friction between Kennedy aides and Johnson aides after the assassination, the author's condemnation of the Secret Service and the Dallas police, Mrs. Kennedy's scuffle, with a nurse in Parkside Hospital — had already been skimmed off by serialization in Look magazine.

But crumbs remained, including Mr. Manchester's description of the black satchel that was always close to Mr. Kennedy, then close to Mr. Johnson on the day of tragedy.

The man in charge of that bag, Warrant Officer Ira D. Gearhart of the Signal Corps, had "the most sinister task in the Presidential Party," the author said. He was variously known as "Shadow," "the man with the satchel" and "the bagman."

"The bag," Mr. Manchester wrote, was a 30-pound metal suitcase with an intricate combination lock containing "various bulky Strangelove packets, each bearing wax seals and the signatures of the Joint Chiefs."

The bag was sometimes called 'the football."

"Inside one packet were cryptic numbers which would permit the President to set up a crude hot line to the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and the President of France on four minutes' notice.

"A second provided the codes that would launch a nuclear attack. The rest contained pages of close text enlivened by gaudy color cartoons. They looked like comic books — horror comics, really, because they had been carefully designed so that any one of Kennedy's three military aides could quickly tell him how many million casualties would result from Retaliation Able, Retaliation Baker, Retaliation Charlie, etc . . . .

"No one liked to think about them, much less talk about them, and on trips the man with the football was treated as a pariah."

Mr. Manchester said that what he called the new President's ignorance of the contents of the "football" might have been disastrous for the nation.

"Had Russia attacked across the Dew Line, the greatest military establishment in the history of the world might easily have been musclebound during the 15 fateful minutes of warning time and perhaps even afterward, when second-strike capacity became a factor," he said.

According to Mr. Manchester, when news of the assassination reached Washington, fears of an international plot to overthrow the Government assailed the mind of Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara. He said Mr. McNamara immediately alerted every American military base throughout the world.

"By every reasonable signal, the situation was very red," Mr. Manchester wrote.

He credited Mr. McNamara with keeping his head and making "all the right moves."

He quoted President Johnson as saying "there might be war" if Americans became aroused by suspicions that the then Soviet Premier, Nikita S. Khrushchev, and Cuban leader Fidel Castro had conspired to kill President Kennedy.

It was the "wild rumors" about a conspiracy that brought the Warren Commission into existence, the author said. The commission concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald alone had assassinated the President.

Mr. Manchester agreed with the commission's finding.

Mr. Manchester said that President Johnson at his first Cabinet meeting, on Nov. 23, presided "in his meekest manner," telling the members he needed them more than President Kennedy had. The Attorney General arrived late. Some members leaped to their feet, but President Johnson remained seated, the author said.

Later, the President confided to a member of the Cabinet that his "real problems" were with the Attorney General, Mr. Manchester wrote, adding:

"He was convinced that Kennedy's late arrival at the meeting had been intentional, and he insisted that Kennedy, bent upon humiliating him, had confided to 'an aide' that 'We won't go in until he has already sat down.'"

Mr. Manchester added, in a footnote: "Kennedy denies this. When the President's interpretation was described to him, he expressed first amazement, then amusement."

Counter Sales Moderate

PITTSBURGH, March 28 (UPI)—Department stores here reported only moderate counter sales today of Mr. Manchester's book.

The city's three major department stores placed the book on sale yesterday—at least six days prematurely.

A spokesman for Horne's department store said a "horrible mistake" by Harper & Row, the book's publisher, had caused the premature release.

"A bindery of Harper & Row released the books prematurely to a West Coast shipper delivering to Kaufmann's department store in Pittsburgh," the Horne's spokesman said.

"Kaufmann's refused to hold up placing the book on sale and advertised in Sunday's newspapers that the book would go on sale Monday."

The spokesman said Horne's and Gimbel's department stores protested to Harper & Row that because of Kaufmann's action they should receive their promised initial shipments.

A truck was hired by Harper & Row to deliver 2,500 copies each to Horne's and Gimbel's.

"The book has not caught on yet," said Eugene Horner, the book buyer for Gimbel's. "It's going better than an average best seller, but nothing like we had been prepared for."

He said that although advance sales were good, the store has sold only about 150 copies over the counter.

Kaufmann's also reported only moderate counter sales.